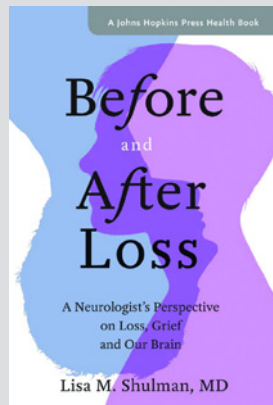


Book Reviews



Before and after loss: A neurologist's perspective on loss, grief and our brain

Lisa M Shulman

Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press
2018
184pp
ISBN: 978 1 421 42695 2

This book is written by an American neurologist who has previously written about Parkinsonism to help the general reader faced with such an illness. Here she does something similar for bereaved people but with the important difference that it is informed by her experience of the death and bereavement of her second husband, a fellow neurologist. This gives an immediacy and conviction to her narrative.

Those unfamiliar with American medicine will be perturbed by her account of the fruitless technological wizardry that ultimately failed to keep her husband alive and the minimal palliative care that seems to have provided little more than a 'comfort pack'.

Lisa Shulman sees bereavement as, first and foremost, a traumatic stress, of such intensity that it threatens mental health. She sees 'complicated grief' (CG) as '... closely linked' to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Both are 'natural responses to unusually traumatic circumstances' and rooted in 'dissociation' for that '... is common in both CG and PTSD' (p.59). At the same time she recognises that the ability to switch off or delay powerful thoughts and feelings is a coping mechanism that enables traumatised people to deal with the danger of overload by rationing it into bite-sized chunks. With many others, she sees dissociation as both the root of problems and a solution.

Even so, as the book progressed I became aware that Shulman has missed out one of the areas of discourse that I regard as quite central to our understanding of grief and the problems to which it gives rise, that is, the psychology of love. The distinguishing feature of grief is pining for a lost person and searching for them. But we are searching in the wrong place. There is a very real sense in which the loved person remains a part of us.

To be fair, Lisa Shulman writes very well and her knowledge of trauma and its effects on the brain are well described. Indeed I found much of her advice on the management of trauma quite worthwhile. The book is a short one and interspersed with recipes and loosely related tales from travels in Japan, India and Aboriginal Australia that are tantalising but of dubious value without a more detailed analysis.

Being half in love with the USA I felt a comfortable familiarity with a book that treats life, death and bereavement as a series of rational scientific problems to be solved. I too started my professional life as such a doctor and readers who share that viewpoint will find it rewarding. Others may wonder where the heart went. ■

Colin Murray Parkes

Former Chair, Bereavement Care Editorial Board
Email: cmparkes@aol.com



The M Word

Brian Conaghan

London: Bloomsbury
2019
52pp
ISBN HB 978 1 4088 7156 0
TPB 978 1 5266 0815 4
ebook 978 1 4088 7158 4

It's no surprise that this novel is a Costa children's and Irish book award winner.

Maggie Yates is shut down, unable to allow herself to feel the pain about the death of her best friend. Maggie's home life is no bundle of fun either. The harshness of life for Maggie makes her angry with the world, with everyone, and most significantly with herself. For a while, her kindness, integrity and wisdom are crushed beneath her visceral rage. We accompany Maggie as she finds her way towards forgiving her best friend, forgiving her mum, forgiving herself, and embracing a future of possibilities. Gradually she is able to allow people in and her feelings out. As we get to know her more deeply with every turn of the page, her bright, insightful and tender nature begins to emerge.

The prologue packs a punch with a sublime twist that offers the reader welcome relief and captures attention right from the start. From there, we are taken on a journey